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Teachers are asked to reappraise psychological approaches to foreign language instruction and to recognize the vital change in the discipline from an academic elective for an intellectual elite to its widespread acceptance as a communication tool. Suggestions are offered for proper sequencing, stressing the heterogeneous nature of the classroom, and for ways to elicit responses in pattern drills. A few remarks on language teaching history are offered. (DS)

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Minimizing Dropouts in the Foreign Language Program

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FOR many years the learning of foreign languages was thought to be a prerogative of the intellectual elite. "In the past, students taking a foreign language have come from the college preparatory group, and there has been a tendency to consider foreign language study too difficult for the average child."[1] The objective of the course was limited to the development of the reading skill since only two years of the high school program were generally devoted to foreign languages.

"A contributing factor [leading to a deemphasis of the importance of modern languages in the secondary schools] was the 1924–29 investigation known as the "Modern Foreign Language Study," supported by grants from the Carnegie Corporation, which, in an attempt to analyze the situation, especially in the high schools, and to salvage as much as possible, actually served to weaken further the position of modern languages. Many books resulted from this research project, among them word and idiom counts which were to serve as a scientific basis for the preparation of language texts. The most controversial of these publications was *The Teaching of Modern Languages in the United States*, known as the "Coleman Report," prepared in 1929 by a committee of which Professor Algernon Coleman of the University of Chicago served as secretary. He found that eighty-three percent of American high-school pupils studied a foreign language for only two years. This amount of time being obviously inadequate to acquire all the language skills and to gain an insight into another culture, Coleman concluded that it would be best to concentrate on one skill, reading."[2]

With this minimal two-year sequence at their "disposal," foreign language teachers faced the challenge in earnest. The building blocks had to be cut to size in a hurry: long vocabulary lists to be committed to memory, a comprehensive study of grammatical rules laced with all the finery of inevitable exceptions, translations from English to French to clarify grammatical misunderstandings, *et quoi encore*!

No wonder success in language learning became a question of the survival of the fittest! If foreign language learning, like the study of mathematics, was to serve as a discipline of the mind, there was no point in wasting time with students who showed any signs of confusion at their first encounter with the new language. There was no time to recognize individual learning differences or varying degrees of motivation. And if at first they didn't succeed, don't let them bother again!

A NEW POPULATION

During the last decade, enrollments in the modern foreign language programs in our schools have skyrocketed. The study of languages may have been for the select few *in the past*, but a new gospel is being preached. "All students, according to recommendations of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals in 1959, should have the opportunity to elect foreign language study and to continue it as long as their interest and ability permit, whether or not they are planning to go to college."[3]

Despite the massive financial support of the NDEA Language Institute Program, the majority of teachers found it extremely difficult to adjust to the new policy. What was the focus of the adjustment that was to be made? A reordering of objectives (to make place for the development of all four basic language skills) of course was essential. But more important still, had teachers adjusted to the new student population that filled their classrooms?

[1] Ilo Remer, *A Handbook for Guiding Students in Modern Foreign Languages*, Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1963, p. 4.

[2] George B. Watts, "The Teaching of French in the United States: A History," *The French Review*, Volume XXXVII, No. 1 (October, 1963), p. 43.

[3] Remer, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

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When the floodgate opened for "all students," foreign language teachers had to learn to cope with students who had not necessarily been the top students in English the previous year. Again the teacher was frustrated at the heterogeneity of this new class. It was no longer possible to assume that the majority of students might have had at least one year of Latin before coming to modern language study. Where modern languages were now introduced in the junior high school (or elementary school), less grammatical background in English made the task "more challenging," to say the least!

A New Psychological Approach

If the language teacher is to meet the challenge, foreign language teaching can no longer be a process of "separating the wheat from the chaff." With a few exceptions, most students are potentially successful learners of a modern foreign language. There are many factors which contribute to make this success possible—e.g, a longer sequence, more effective techniques of instruction, appropriate materials and equipment, etc. The most important factor, however, and the one that concerns us here, is the psychological approach of the teacher. If the teachers continue to operate under the former policy, it is the death of the modern foreign language program in the schools (or a regression to the status quo of days gone by).

Attrition—A Function of Embarrassment

There is no more embarrassing and frustrating situation for the learner than the one in which he is asked to display his learning, when he hasn't in fact learned! Yet the pride of the adolescent often becomes the subconscious target of the well-intentioned teacher. His method is to challenge the student slightly beyond his ability to respond—just to let him, and the class, know who's boss! Of course, this tactic is symptomatic of an insecure teacher. Sometimes it may be a rebuttal to the student whose question weakened somewhat the pedestal on which the teacher was standing.

It is suggested that the psychological challenge for the teacher is to develop greater sensitivity to the learner's exact position in the sequence of foreign language learning. The spoon-feeding of answers will only irritate the student who already knows and will deny him the opportunity to advance one more step toward mastery. On the other hand, how many learners are made to "sweat out" an impatient and insistent teacher.

Quel temps fait-il aujourd'hui, Gary? is too often followed by a long and embarrassing pause. The student probably knew the answer yesterday, but he's just come from Algebra class and simply hasn't been thinking French! Timing on the part of the teacher becomes all important. After too blank a stare from the learner, the teacher can immediately help: *Est-ce qu'il fait beau, ou est-ce qu'il fait mauvais?* The answer is built into the question, but the learner must nevertheless select the correct answer, and is able to "get off the hook" gracefully. And, in the presence of his peers, this is psychologically very important to him.

Before embarrassing that "favorite" student into attention and submission, why not begin with a spontaneous review? *Qui peut me dire quels sont les ports principaux de France?* will engage volunteers to recall the correct answers for the entire class. Students may then be confronted on an individual basis with a more comfortable feeling about both question and answer.

Formulating Correct Responses

Practice which leads to a succession of mistakes can only cause embarrassment and discouragement on the part of the learner. The sensitive teacher will be able to detect the problem, to reduce it to its component parts, to rebuild the learner's confidence by drilling these parts, and to return to the original question (which the learner should now answer without difficulty). Synthesis must always follow the analysis.

For example: Asking students to substitute prepositional phrases of place in a correlation drill may lead to frustration if a mixed drill is attempted prematurely. If the cue *l'église* for correlation in the pattern *Nous allons au magasin* results in **Nous allons au l'église*, the teacher has obviously outdistanced the learners. Separate drills stressing the use of masculine nouns on the one hand and feminine nouns on the other must be undertaken to restore the learn-

er's confidence with the pattern. Then, back to the mixed drill.

The example is perhaps oversimplified, but the point is that too many teachers are impatient to cover thirty lessons for the year. And in many cases the materials are too ambitious, and discouraging, for the maturity level of the students.

With the help of properly sequenced learning materials, teachers can hope to provide more students with a successful experience in modern language study. In the absence of these materials the teacher will have to supply what the textbook does not offer—proper sequencing.

Proper sequencing is stressed because, without it, the teacher cannot lead the student toward the formulating of correct responses. The hands of the eight-month-old child must not go unsupported prematurely. A faulty step can delay unduly the process of learning to walk.

The language learner who has had the experience of giving mostly correct answers will develop the confidence needed to use the language in a face-to-face situation, and his attitude toward the study of foreign languages will not be undermined. On the contrary, frequent and repetitive failures will cause more and more students to drop the subject after one hellish year (for both the student and the teacher). And it can be safely assumed that this scar will take a long time in the healing—notwithstanding the best efforts of any other language teacher in the future.

Conclusion

With a more heterogeneous group of students populating our language classrooms, it is indispensable that teachers adopt a different psychological approach. When the typical language program was limited to a two-year sequence, teachers might have been justified in considering language study on a strictly academic basis. With new objectives designed to meet the challenge of an international world, it is imperative that foreign languages be studied by a larger segment of our student population.

The proposition offered by a modern psychologist has now become the challenge of the language teacher: "When a student does not learn, the teacher fails the course."[4]

[4] B. R. Bugelski, *The Psychology of Learning Applied to Teaching*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1964, p. 92.

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